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Chair

The Honourable Robert Nault

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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● (1535)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Robert Nault (Kenora, Lib.)): Colleagues, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), this meeting with the delegation from Tibet is now in session. The head of the delegation is Mr. Baimawangdui, and we welcome him to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

I understand that Ms. Chen is going to be the translator, and we would ask the head of the delegation to introduce his colleagues who are at the table. We'll go right into a presentation for roughly 10 minutes, and then into questions and answers as we usually do.

I'll turn the floor over to Mr. Baimawangdui.

Mr. Baimawangdui (Head of Delegation, Deputy, People's Congress of Tibet Autonomous Region, Delegation from Tibet) (Interpretation): Distinguished Chairman Nault and friends from the foreign affairs and international development committee, it is a pleasure for me and my delegation to visit Canada, especially this foreign affairs committee here today, and to have discussions with our counterparts. If I may, I would like to introduce the major members of our delegation.

Mr. Pubudunzhu is deputy to the National People's Congress, and he's also the mayor of Shannan City from the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Mr. Duojiciren is a deputy to the People's Congress of the Tibet Autonomous Region and vice-chair of the Committee on ethnic, religious, foreign and overseas Chinese affairs of the People's Congress of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Mr. Awangdanzeng is a deputy to the People's Congress of the Tibet Autonomous Region and the vice-chair of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference of Zha'nang County in Shannan City. He is also the deputy director general of the administrative office of Minzhulin Temple, also located in Zha'nang County in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

I am a deputy to the People's Congress of the Tibet Autonomous Region and secretary of the Lhasa Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China.

At present, the China-Canada relationship is maintaining a good momentum of development with close contact between the higher levels. We have also witnessed frequent economic and trade exchanges between the two sides. This year is the Canada-China Year of Tourism. We have come here this year at this time, which makes me feel quite happy.

I would like to brief you about the basic situation of Tibet. The Tibet Autonomous Region is located in the southwest part of China. It is one of five autonomous regions in China. It covers an area of about 1.2 million square kilometres with a population of 3.37 million people.

Tibet has been an integral part of China since ancient time. Since ancient time, the Tibetan people have lived in the Qinghai–Tibet plateau, but we have even closer relationships and exchanges with the inner land in terms of politics, economies, and cultures. During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, and currently, the central government of the Republic of China has exercised effective administration over Tibet. Especially during the Yuan dynasty, Tibet was incorporated into the map of China.

In 1951, we had the peaceful liberation of Tibet, which eliminated the feudal serfdom and greatly improved people's livelihood. The farmers and herdsmen live on the plateau. They are given their land, grassland, and livestock for survival and living, and have said goodbye to the lives that were being exploited by the slave-owners. They have become master of their life.

Starting with the peaceful liberation, with the leadership and support from the central government of China, and also the effective assistance from other provinces in China, the situation in Tibet has improved a lot. Especially since the 18th national congress, and also under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, with Mr. Xi Jinping at its core, we have carried out the people-centred concept, and improved economic, social, and various situations in Tibet.

The economy is growing rapidly, and the infrastructure has also improved. In terms of the GDP, in 2017 the figure was at 131 billion RMB, which is 1,000 times more than that at the beginning of the peaceful liberation, which was only about 131 million RMB.

● (1540)

The infrastructure in Tibet is much better than in previous times. We have established a comprehensive transportation system, including railways, highways, and aviation. For example, we have already put into force the railway from Golmud to Lhasa and from Lhasa to Shigatse, and there is a total of 90,000 kilometres of highways. We have five airports in the region, which can help us reach 47 cities in this country, with 79 routes.

The one thing to mention is that the energy system has developed quite rapidly, especially the clean energy. The installed capacity of the electricity has reached about 3.9 million kilowatts. We have a clean energy mix composed of water, wind, and solar power, which can reach the 62 counties in this region.

Especially, we can see the progress of Tibet in the per capita GDP. The number for the year 2017 is over 10,000 RMB.

The living conditions in Tibet are also much better than before. We have launched a lot of projects and programs to make sure that people are comfortable and in safe living conditions. These have benefited about 400,000 households and 2.4 million people in Tibet.

In terms of education, we have paid much attention to the improvement of the whole education system, including preschool, basic, high-level, and also continuing education. For the compulsory education, the students don't need to pay for their accommodations, their food, or their tuition at school. There are about 660,000 students in universities and colleges, with 18,000 graduates every year.

● (1545)

The medical service system in Tibet is also much improved, and we have medical service free of charge in the whole region for four levels, namely, the city level, the prefecture level, the county level, and the township level. We fundamentally improved the medical services for the farmers and herdsmen living there; and the life expectancy has increased remarkably, from 35.5 years at the beginning of liberation to 68.1 years currently.

Compared with where we were before, we have achieved a lot. However, compared with other countries and regions, including Canada, we are still comparatively at a low level of development, which will require further effort in the future.

The various ethnic groups living in Tibet have enjoyed good protection of human and cultural rights, especially in the protection of spoken and written languages in Tibet. The government has issued policies and regulations for better learning, use, and development of the local spoken and written languages.

● (1550)

There are clear-cut stipulations in the policies, which help the local people quite a lot by allowing them to use their own language in their work and other aspects of life. We have also finished the process of compiling the Tibetan language teaching text, which is currently used in schools, as well as in other aspects of the protection of local culture.

With respect to freedom of religious belief, it is quite ideologically respected and protected in Tibet. We currently have 1,700 sites for religious beliefs, with 46,000 monks and nuns living in monasteries and temples, satisfying the needs of worshippers.

As living standards improve and as transportation conditions become better, more and more people outside of Tibet are involved in religious activities, which means that the Tibetan government and the government in Lhasa need to do more to provide related services. The people worship in various ways. They kneel down in the kowtow position, with the prayer wheel in their hands, or they go inside the monasteries to worship.

Many Canadians have visited Tibet, and I think you know a lot about that.

● (1555)

The ecological environment is well protected in Tibet. There are very good conditions for ecological protection from a global perspective.

In terms of ecological protection, the improvement is attributed to many things. First, there is the improved awareness in those from all walks of life there. We carried out the concept proposed by President Xi that the Green Mountains are mountains of treasure. Even the Tibetan Plateau is snow-capped, but we still think it can also turn into a mountain of treasure if we protect the environment well.

Second is that the state council, or the central government, has a plan for the ecological environment of Qinghai and the Tibetan Plateau. To be specific, there is about 770 million RMB in funding for environmental protection, of which two million RMB are for the protection of grasslands in Tibet.

The third point, which is last but not least, is that we have allocated about one-third of the total territory of Tibet to be a natural reserve. It covers about 410,000 square kilometres, providing good conditions for environmental protection.

I worked in Lhasa, the capital city of the Tibet Autonomous Region. We have quite good environmental quality, maybe in the top three cities in China. For the first quarter of this year, we ranked second among all of the cities in this country.

I will just stop my introduction here and say that during my two short days in Canada, I have learned a lot of good things and had good experiences.

● (1600)

I will take those back to my country and to my region, which can further improve the local area a lot in the future.

The Chair: Thank you very much to Mr. Baimawangdui for his presentation.

Colleagues, we're going to get right into questions, starting with Mr. Genuis, please.

Garnett.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): [*Member speaks in Tibetan*]

Members might not know, but that was—though badly—the first time the Tibetan language has been used thus far in this meeting. Perhaps it's revealing enough, sir, that you came here and spoke as a representative purportedly of the Tibetan people, but you didn't use the Tibetan language; you spoke Chinese.

Of course, members might know that there is a gentleman, Tashi Wangchuk, who is an advocate for the Tibetan language, who currently faces 15 years in prison as a result of his advocacy and his simple statements on his blog that China's own laws should be followed with respect to the ability to use the Tibetan language.

I'm also struck by how you talk about all these alleged economic improvements, yet Canadian officials tell us that they can't even get basic access to Tibet to check on the status of Canadian development projects. How are we in any way to assess the credibility of the claims you're making when our officials can't even get in to see progress on projects that Canadian tax dollars are funding, and they're told by Chinese officials, after those projects are complete, that they are no longer concerns of Canada even though they're Canadian-funded projects?

All these claims about human rights and about economic development are striking in light of the complete denial of access and in light of the fact that Freedom House says Tibet is the second-least free place in the world, after Syria. We have no ability to assess your claims, because your government doesn't allow us access. That's unfortunate, because I think we would like to assess the veracity of the claims you've made.

I want to ask you a specific question dealing with the whereabouts of the Panchen Lama.

Gedhun Choekyi Nyima is recognized by the Dalai Lama and by the international Tibetan community as the 11th Panchen Lama.

Oh, I'm sorry, the translation—

The Chair: If you go too far, it will be very difficult for Ms. Chen to translate, so maybe we'll let her translate what you've said so far.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Sure.

● (1605)

Ms. Fangfang Chen (Principal Staff Member, International Exchange Office, Foreign Affairs Committee, National People's Congress, Interpreter, Delegation from Tibet) I'll translate the first part, and then we can move on.

[Interpreter speaks in Chinese]

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'll just finish my comments, then.

I was asking about the Panchen Lama recognized by the Dalai Lama and by the international Tibetan community. He just celebrated, we hope, his 29th birthday, but we don't know if he's dead or alive because he, along with his parents, was abducted by PRC authorities when he was six years old.

Therefore, I would ask you, sir, if you know whether the Panchen Lama, Mr. Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, is dead or alive. Are his parents dead or alive? Where are they? Do international independent authorities have any opportunity to access them?

Thank you.

Ms. Fangfang Chen: He was talking about the case he referred to. I didn't understand a lot or very well about the details.

Mr. Baimawangdui (Interpretation): I believe China is a country under the rule of law. We have ample evidence of criminals who were punished according to the law and the regulations of China.

The second thing is about the language. We are using Chinese rather than the Tibetan language. Since Chinese is a universal language used in China, there is no problem with us speaking Chinese, but if any one of you can speak the Tibetan language then it is okay for me to talk in the Tibetan language. From Tibetan to Chinese and then Chinese to English we would have double the translation. Only in light of time we are going to speak in Chinese.

The third point is about the opening up of Tibet. As the country is more and more open to the outside world, Tibet is also more open. There are more and more tourists from inside and outside of China coming to Tibet.

One thing I need to mention is that it is a very special area. It is located in a plateau and the ecological situation is not quite the same as that of inland China.

Anyway, we welcome all of those people who are friendly toward us but Tibetan people would never welcome those who uphold or support the separatist activities or who impede the unity of China.

● (1610)

With regard to Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, he is an ordinary citizen of China and having an ordinary life in Tibet. He has already received a modern education, and I think he and his family members don't want to, are not willing to, be interrupted by the external environment. If there is an opportunity, you will see that he has a very good life now.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to Mr. Virani, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Chair, can I just make an offer? There's a gentleman here who's offered to translate if the witness would like to speak in the Tibetan language. There's someone who can translate if there's interest in that.

The Chair: I think I'll accept the argument of the translator. With the limited time we have, I don't think that will work for us, Garnett. We'll go to Mr. Virani and we'll stick with the translation we have. Thank you.

Mr. Arif Virani (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Thank you very much.

First of all, I appreciate your being here. We appreciate the stronger ties that we're developing with China and the Government of the People's Republic. This allows us to discuss a wide range of issues, including matters of human rights, which our government always raises when interacting with foreign partners and foreign allies.

I take particular interest in human rights matters since I am a constitutional and human rights lawyer, a member who represents a riding that includes 7,000 Tibetan Canadians—so *tashi delek*—and also the chair of the Parliamentary Friends of Tibet.

Could you just translate that first, please?

Ms. Fangfang Chen: Could you just repeat the latter part?

Mr. Arif Virani: —the chair of the Parliamentary Friends of Tibet.

The Chair: Ms. Chen, you can ask a question if you're not sure.

Could you repeat that, Mr. Virani?

Mr. Arif Virani: I said that I take particular interest in human rights matters because I am a human rights and constitutional lawyer, a member who represents a riding that has 7,000 Tibetan Canadians, and the chair of the Parliamentary Friends of Tibet group.

Given that preamble, I want to ask you three categories of questions, all of which arise from a public response from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to a petition that was tabled by Mr. Garrison in the House of Commons.

The first relates to Tashi Wangchuk, the case that was outlined by Mr. Genuis. He was charged with inciting separatism, under your Chinese criminal code, for advocating for the cultural rights of Tibetans to study in the Tibetan language. Promoting cultural language and language identity is a significant priority for our government. We are doing this with indigenous languages here in Canada. Specifically, I want to ask you why the Government of Canada was denied permission to attend Tashi Wangchuk's trial, which took place on January 4. What was the decision of the court? Why is advocating for language rights viewed as a separatist activity? That's the first set of questions.

The second set of questions relates to the Panchen Lama, again raised by Mr. Genuis. You confirmed that he is alive and that his parents are alive, in your previous response. I want to know if you'd be willing to arrange for a Canadian or an international delegation to visit Gendhun Choekyi Nyima in the coming months.

A third point relates to His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the Sino-Tibetan dialogue. That is a dialogue that took place over nine meetings between the People's Republic and envoys of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. There were nine meetings between 2002 and 2010. We want to ask why, in your opinion, that Sino-Tibetan dialogue about the middle-way approach has been stalled since 2010. What conditions would be necessary for China to return to the dialogue table? I think that returning to the dialogue to discuss the middle-way approach is an important issue for Tibetan Canadians in this country.

Thank you. *Thuk je che.*

● (1620)

Mr. Baimawangdui (Interpretation): I'm talking about human rights, and I think there's no conflict between the protection of the local Tibetan spoken and written language and the rule of law. What the person you mentioned said was to protect the local languages, no matter whether they're spoken or written, and what he did was to incite separatist activity…and we need to focus on what he did, rather than what he said.

Second, you mentioned Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. I would like to repeat again that he has a really healthy and happy life in Tibet, and he has received a good, modern education. We need to respect his willingness and also his family members. When talking about human rights there, we need to respect everybody's rights, including those of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. If he doesn't want to be interrupted by the outside world, then we need to respect him. It is irrational, I think, for the....You mentioned the Canadian delegation or the international delegation coming to Tibet, which may interrupt his life.

Third is the middle way and the negotiation and the dialogue between the central government and the Dalai Lama. I think the so-called middle way has no way. He targeted the Dalai clique. He aims to have Tibetan independence. They have their own slogan, but we also need to see what he did. He wanted to achieve the independence of Tibet. If you have basic knowledge about the situation of Tibet, you would not believe what he said.

The Dalai Lama said the greater Tibetan zone will never be accepted by the central government of China and also the people of Tibet. The Dalai clique wanted to achieve so-called high-level autonomy and the middle way, but I think the ultimate motivation is to maintain the privilege of the feudal serfdom system, which was exercised before the liberation of Tibet.

I suggest that when you're talking about the issue of Tibet, you need to figure out from what perspective you are looking at this issue. We need to focus on and take into consideration the requirement and the willingness of the majority, the farmers and herdsmen living in Tibet, what they require and what they want to have and to see, and then we can have better discussions relating to the Tibetan people. Without knowing the basic situation and the basic willingness of the people, how can we have a sound conclusion about Tibet? In addition, in recent years we have had a very stable situation in Tibet, without any self-immolation. Maybe there are rare cases in other provinces that were inhabited by the Tibetan people as well.

● (1625)

Four of us are Tibetan people; we were born and grew up in the Tibetan plateau and also worked there for many years. I myself have been to 74 of the counties and towns in Tibet, and for each county and town, at least three times.

Mr. Pubudunzhu is now the mayor of Shannan City. He previously worked in Lhasa and in many other cities of Tibet.

From our discussion and dialogue with the local people and the grassroots people, we understand well what they want physically and spiritually and what they need. We need to take into consideration fully the requirements of the majority of the Tibetan people.

The Chair: With your permission we'll ask Madame Laverdière to ask her questions. We'll allow her to do that and after that we'll wrap up.

Madame Laverdière, *s'il vous plaît.*

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First, I would like to point out how concerned I am about the situation of Tashi Wangchuk and Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the 11th Panchen Lama. Since a number of my colleagues around the table have already asked many questions about this, I will not go back to it.

You talked about how important it is to understand the situation and the basic desires of Tibetans. I completely agree, but many people say it would be important to let delegations travel freely to Tibet and meet the people they want to meet. The only way to truly understand a situation is to be free to move and interact with the locals you visit.

That being said, I would like to know whether you have met with representatives of the Tibetan community in Canada. If not, would you be willing to do so?

Thank you very much.

● (1630)

[*English*]

Mr. Baimawangdui (Interpretation): You mentioned the Tibetan communities living here in Canada. Actually, in Toronto yesterday and in Ottawa today, I have met the representatives, the patriotic Tibetan people living here in Canada. They have a very good life here, and we are really concerned about them. We will have equal treatment for those patriots no matter whether they live inside or outside our country. As long as Tibetan people give up the concept and the act of pursuing Tibetan independence, then they are welcome back in Tibet anytime, no matter where they are living or working. Since now they are working and living in other countries, in Canada, I hope they can obey the local laws and regulations and improve their own lives through hard work. For us, we would like to offer help to them if they have any need.

Talking about free access to Tibet, this year marks the fortieth anniversary of reform and the opening up of China, and the central government has issued a lot of policies. President Xi Jinping, in Hainan province, also published a lot of other measures for opening up and reform.

I think for Tibet, the policy of opening up will never be changed; the door will only be more and more open to the outside world, but as I mentioned previously, it is a special area with a particular ecological situation.

● (1635)

If you conform to the laws and regulations related to regional ethnic autonomy, they don't impact access to Tibet, so I do believe that you would have a good chance of going to Tibet to have a look at it.

The Chair: Thank you.

To Mr. Baimawangdui, I want to say to you and your colleagues from the People's Congress of the Tibet Autonomous Region thank you very much for your presentation, and thank you for your candidness. I think this has been a very good discussion.

As Canadians, we ask very direct questions, and we appreciate the direct answers from our colleagues from other countries abroad. This has been very helpful for us to understand the position of the People's Congress of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

We wish you the very best on your trip here in Canada and continuous success in improving the lives of the people who live there.

Colleagues, maybe I should get Ms. Chen to interpret that, and then we'll move to other business.

Ms. Fangfang Chen Thank you very much.

● (1640)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, we'll suspend for a couple of minutes. When our guests leave, we'll get down to the other orders of business.

Thank you.

● (1640)

(Pause)

● (1640)

The Chair: Colleagues, as I understand it, the bells will ring at 5:15 p.m., so we would like to do some business. One of the items of business is that Madam Laverdière would like the floor.

We're not in camera; we're still out of camera, for everyone's knowledge.

Madam Laverdière has a motion she'd like to present and discuss with you, and then we'll put it to a vote, I understand.

I'll turn the floor over to Hélène.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Laverdière, you have the floor.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I will be brief since we have to go to vote soon. I would like to move a motion, which reads as follows:

> That pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development undertake a study on how Canada can better contribute to peace, security, justice, respect for human rights and economic development in the Middle East, with particular emphasis on the conflicts in Israel/Palestine, Yemen, and Syria, as well as the spheres of influence of countries in the region, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia; that the committee hear from expert witnesses and travel to the region in order to identify areas where Canada can make more positive contributions; and that it report its findings back to the House.

I would like to briefly add that, given the news we are hearing today about Iran, the tragedy in Yemen, the conflict between Israel and Palestine, which is particularly challenging these days, and the crisis in Syria, the least the committee could do is to address the issue and explore ways in which Canada could contribute to peace and security in that part of the world.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Is there any further discussion? Mr. Genuis, go ahead, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I want to thank Ms. Laverdière for bringing this forward. I just want to qualify a bit why Conservatives will be voting against this study.

I think these are very important issues. Certainly, Ms. Laverdière has put forward a number of studies, which the committee has done recently, one on consular affairs, which we just wrapped up, and there have been other proposals for studies that the committee has adopted.

At the same time, there are many different issues to study in terms of foreign affairs. I know that we have a proposal for a study of security threats in Canada's Arctic, and that's something that is right on our immediate doorstep in terms of our own security. This is not to minimize the importance of these issues in the Middle East, which I think all of us are seized with and engaged with in different ways. However, at the same time, there has to be a bit of balance in terms of different members of the committee putting forward different studies that are adopted. I think we should proceed with the Arctic study. There may be proposals from other members in terms of what we study as well. On that basis, just in terms of time allocation and what studies different members have put forward, I think that our side, at least, is going to vote against those.

● (1645)

The Chair: Mr. Wrzesnewskyj.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): I would just like to concur with Mr. Genuis's comments on the importance of the subject matter, but also, there are a number of subject matters that have been brought forward by other members. We have just concluded this important study on consular affairs, and Ms. Laverdière has brought forward many very interesting studies, a number of which we've been seized with. However, there are other motions before the committee and, as a result of that, we'll be voting against.

The Chair: The last point is to Madam Laverdière.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to ask for a recorded vote.

[*English*]

The Chair: We will have a recorded vote. Now that there is no further discussion, we'll move to voting for or against the motion.

(Motion negatived: nays 9; yeas 1)

The Chair: Thank you, colleagues.

Thanks to Madam Laverdière for bringing forward her motion.

Now we'll go in camera and deal with the business that was put to you through the subcommittee report. We will suspend.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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